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AUTHOR Fernandez, Ermitas
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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a school readiness program that has been implemented in rural Galicia (Spain) since 1977. Data reveal that 70 percent of Galicia's population lives in rural areas, the economy remains primarily agricultural, Galicians earn less than the national average and have the largest number of public assistance recipients, and there is a 40 percent failure rate in the schools (higher in rural areas). The program aims to prepare parents to create a conducive educational environment in the home and to choose activities that support their children's development in all areas. The families of 2,658 children aged 0-6 are currently involved in the program, which has 22 counselor teachers, 4 volunteers, 19 aides, and 6 municipal councils. Meetings are held with parents and children every 2 weeks and include presentations of children's home learning activities, instructions for parents on home learning activities, planning for future activities and learning themes, and discussion of child rearing issues. Other program activities include a parent newsletter, radio programs for parents and children, a weekly half-hour television program for parents, resource materials concerning child rearing, and the publication of booklets for parents on various subjects. Program evaluation reveals that meetings have enhanced the self-esteem of parents, improved the quality of family life for participants, led to better use of local resources, and resulted in parents' active participation in their children's education. Additionally, children displayed improved communication skills, increased self-esteem, and independence. (LP)

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Chapter 3
"PREESCOLAR NA CASA" TEACHING PARENTS TO TEACH CHILDREN

Ermitas Fernández
Cáritas, Galicia
Spain

"Preescolar na Casa" (preschool at home) is an educational program in rural Galicia aimed at teaching parents to teach children by getting them directly involved in the education of their own children. "Preescolar na Casa" is organized in the home by the parents and families for children aged 0-6. It capitalizes on real-life experiences, daily activities and the local environment.

Parents cannot provide this type of education without help from professionals, who discuss, elaborate and systematize, and without materials specially designed by these professionals. The process is based on a program of regular meetings.

GALICIA

Galicia, one of Spain's 17 autonomous communities, is located at the northwest tip of the peninsula. It has its own government and parliament.

Population

Of all the autonomous communities, Galicia has suffered the greatest loss of population. Between 1981 and 1991, its population fell from 2,811,912 to 2,709,743, a drop of 3.6%. The population loss has been primarily in the hinterland. The population is tending to concentrate in the Vigo-La Coruña corridor, at the expense of the Lugo-Orense corridor, leading to not only a demographic but also an economic and social imbalance between the coast and the interior.

Seventy percent of the population lives in rural areas. The population is

;ing rapidly; there are now more deaths than births in Galicia. In 1990, the region lost 5,534 inhabitants. Fifteen percent of the population is over 65, as much as 20% in Lugo and Orense provinces.

The population is scattered. Galicia has 31,984 population clusters, half of all the communities in Spain, although it covers only 5.8% of Spain's area and contains only 7.1% of its population. Despite their dispersal, these population centres fit into a hierarchy which goes from the village and the parish up to the region.

The parish is the basic historic, economic, social and cultural unit of Galician society, but paradoxically it has no legal status. In this system, the village, the parish, the region and "a vila" (where there is one) form a web; the commune, as it exists in the rest of the country, is therefore a purely artificial construct.

Economy

Galicia has little industry. Only 14.6% of the population is employed in the industrial sector (compared with the national average of 21.7%). There is no Galician industrial model based on a regional economic development strategy. There are however a number of industries exploiting our resources for foreign interests. Galicia has no home-grown entrepreneurial class, with only a few exceptions in the garment industry (Inditex) and food (Coren, Pescanova). There is no entrepreneurial "culture" in Galicia, which makes it difficult to create the indigenous developmental dynamic.

The economy remains primarily agricultural. Thirty percent of the labour force works on small farms, compared with the national average of 11%. These farms are very fragmented (15 plots of an average 0.4 hectares per farm) and 70% have less than 5 hectares of land. The leading activity is livestock production. Few of these farms can be said to be prospering.

Society

Traditional agricultural society has left its imprint on our character and way of life. This society was built on community. Individuals existed through the group — home, family, parish, neighbours — breeding a deep sense of solidarity and mutual aid and giving rise to a close-knit community.

Economic modernization and the resulting crisis in traditional agricultural society have not produced in Galicia a coherent transformation adapted to local realities and accepted by the population. A capitalist economy was introduced into a precapitalist system, fragmenting traditional social structures and ushering in profound social and cultural change. However, there is widespread resistance to change. Galician society is today divided between rurality, which we all bear within us, and the gradual spread of modernity.

So it is that while supermarkets are invading our cities, village markets still continue to exist, although their numbers are shrinking. The introduction of new services in rural areas is sparking rivalry but at the same time, neighbourhood support systems remain strong. In the past, political bosses served as intermediaries between town and country, between peasants and the bureaucracy. Today, they have adopted more "democratic" methods: services rendered are no longer paid for in kind but with votes. Despite the rise of the nuclear family, the decline in the birth rate and the exodus of young people to the cities, families continue to be close-knit patriarchal units.

Language

Galician is closely related to Portuguese. As it is not a recognized language and does represent a cornerstone of our cultural identity, the use and defense of Galician is often seen as a political act. The majority of citizens consider themselves Galician rather than Spanish or European, and 39% consider themselves very or quite nationalist.

The overwhelming majority of Galicians understand Galician (94%) and speak it (87%). Fewer people use it daily (50%). In rural areas Galician is the common language, but in the towns of La Coruña, Ferrol and Vigo, Castilian dominates. Moreover, Galician is primarily a spoken language: only 35% of Galicians can write it and 50% read it.

Poverty

Thirty-four percent of Galicia's population derives its livelihood from agriculture. The peasants live in grinding poverty. With small farms and small herds, long delayed and poorly applied modernization, an aging farm population (35% of farm operators are over 65), widespread functional illiteracy (80% of farm operators did not go to school) and the departure of young people, the situation has deteriorated to the point where farm families now survive on the pensions of the elderly, the little money that emigrants send home, and extra income from odd jobs.

Fishermen are probably the most exploited group. Their living and working conditions are harsh. According to a recent survey, 50% of Galicians who fish off the Canary-Sahara bank work 18 hours a day and the accident rate is 92%; 34% will abandon the trade to work on shore, even for less money. Family problems, alcoholism and drugs abuse are rampant. Young sailers are often drawn into the drug trade.

In 1976-77, Galicia lost 30% of its jobs due to the decline of the industrial sector (compared with a national average of 19%). Galicia's unemployment rate is 15%, of which 57% are women. According to a trade union survey, 60% of Galician

women are single mothers living a precarious existence. Fifty-three percent of farm workers are women, the bulk of whom work with their husbands and, in a patriarchal society, have no decision-making power.

Between 1950 and 1970, Galicia suffered a net loss of 466,510 people through migration. Most emigrants, who left illegally, came from farm families. Just as today North Africans cross the Straits of Gibraltar in skiffs, large numbers of Galicians once crossed the Bidassoa hidden in trucks. Almost half of Galicia's population lives outside Galicia's borders, for we consider emigrants to be part of the Community still.

It is true that some of those who emigrated to other parts of Europe have worked their way up by dint of effort and sacrifice and are now living well; some emigrants have made their fortune in America; but it is also true that many emigrants have come back to their native land, defeated by the economic crisis and preferring life at home to a life of uprootedness and insecurity, and many others live in abject poverty with no social safety net.

In 1989, 20% of Galicia's population received social security. There are almost as many recipients as there are workers paying premiums — one recipient per 1.36 farms. Galicians earn not only less than the national average, but less than any of the other autonomous communities. Of all the autonomous communities, Galicia has the largest number of public assistance recipients.

Education

Education is cut off from the local community. The dispersal of the population makes it difficult to adapt educational programs to local conditions and communications and service infrastructures are largely inadequate.

There is a 40% failure rate in the schools (higher in rural areas). Many students have learning difficulties and many have to repeat grades. Rural families are doing little to improve their education and that of their children, due either to indifference or because they do not think they are capable of it, even though they are well aware of the demands of modern society and want to help their children succeed.

"PREESCOLAR NA CASA"

History

Given the situation we have described, the need for action to raise education levels is clear. But in Galicia, any action of this type must secure the participation of parents as educators from the first years of the child's life. When parents

(father and mother) become involved in educating themselves and their children, the educational level of both parents and children is bound to increase significantly.

There was an urgent need for a solution. At first, there were protests (letters, press releases, reports, study sessions, etc.), but it soon became clear that this approach was insufficient. As it was impossible to quickly reach children in rural areas, a program was developed to help them by other means, for children cannot wait.

The project was intended for all rural families with children under the age of 6 not yet attending school. The purpose was to reach parents to raise their own level of education and help them participate in the education of their children.

The project began in 1977 in four communities where pooled work and education experiments had already been conducted. At the same time, a questionnaire containing three questions was sent to all parish priests in Galicia. These questions were basic to the viability of the project:

- How many children aged 3-5 are there in your parish not attending kindergarten?
- Would you be willing to organize a meeting with the parents of these children?
- Would you be prepared to support a school readiness program addressed to the parents of preschool children?

The survey results indicated that a program of this type was possible and a project was therefore submitted to the Department of National Education, which assigned three school teachers. Parents were then invited to meetings at which we explained why we wanted them to work with their children: the need for a good education in this day and age, the importance of the first years of life in the educational process, the decisive role of parents in the education of their children. We conducted a field test to determine whether parents would be able to contribute effectively to the education of their children.

In most cases, the weekly meetings with the parents and children were led by volunteers, mostly school teachers or priests. They worked with the team of three school teachers, who established the guidelines and organized the meetings. This phase lasted two years. Though the project had a number of failings (weak content, divergence from original objectives, lack of preparation, inadequate follow-up, etc.), we continued to consider the idea valid.

The program was later expanded in quantitative terms with an increase from three full-time teachers to 11, also assigned by the Department of National Education, and a reduction in the number of volunteers. It now has 22 counsellors assigned by the Department of Education of the "Xunta de Galicia," assisted by four volunteers and 19 aides paid by the Department of Social Affairs of the "Xunta de Galicia" and six municipal councils. At the same time, there was also a qualitative improvement. The program was overhauled, its underlying principles and objectives redefined, and the preparation of the counsellors and direct follow-up revised.

Theoretical Foundations

The creation of the "Preescolar na Casa" program sprang from its initiators' conviction that lack of knowledge breeds backwardness, dependence, marginalization and injustice. The more knowledge and skills citizens possess, the greater their chances of enjoying freedom, prosperity and justice.

Research in infant psychology indicates that the first years of life are decisive (see for example B.S. Bloom, *Human Characteristics*) and that culture and knowledge are the fruits of an educational process which must begin in a systematic way before the age of 6, for the ability to develop intellectual abilities and emotional balance declines with age. We believe that if preschool education is lacking, the inevitable result will be slow progress in school.

Parents play a determining role in the educational process. As emotional maturity and intellectual progress are conditioned by the educational atmosphere in the home and by child-rearing practices in the first years of life, and as a good teacher-student relationship helps promote and motivate learning, parental support is always essential to preschool children.

Presently, the preschool education children receive in the home is inadequate and unsuitable, for parents are unaware of their own potential as educators and of the needs and abilities of young children. Indeed, they often labour under serious misconceptions about child-rearing. The education children receive in the schools is also inadequate, for in most cases it is neither adapted nor complemented in the home. Children who live far from school must rise at dawn, contend with tiring travel to and from school, rowdy recesses, etc., without the support of their parents. All this can make them insecure. Moreover, most children go to schools which make no concession to either their language or their cultural background.

Children cannot wait for solutions to be forthcoming, for they obviously cannot stop growing up. Our experience has confirmed that parents are able to adapt and to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to educate their preschool children. We have listened to many mothers report intellectually stimulating conversations with their children and their children's reactions to discovery-oriented activities.

Objectives

The central objective is to prepare parents to create a conducive educational environment in the home and help them choose activities to support their children's physical, psychomotor, intellectual, creative, emotional, social and moral development.

The general goals are the following:

- make sure that everyone has the education they need for full enjoyment of culture and knowledge;
- improve preschool education in rural areas and reduce the school failure rate;
- rear physically and psychologically healthy children who are intellectually alert and emotionally balanced;
- encourage parents to continue participating in their children's education after they start attending school;
- make sure parents look after non-academic areas of education.

For these goals to be achieved, the father and mother must be:

- aware of the importance of education in the first years of life and of the role that family and school can play at this age;
- aware of a child's psychological, physiological, intellectual, emotional and motor development needs, of educational possibilities and the most appropriate actions and attitudes;
- prepared to work on their children's education in a thoughtful, systematic and steady way.

Principles of Action

- proceed from family educational skills;
- promote activities which are practical in a rural environment;
- create and discover educational situations in everyday life;
- make sure both parents and children acquire some inherently important skills;
- work to modify some traditional child-rearing practices;
- encourage creativity in the family soas to develop creative capacities in the child;
- evaluate the educational process (development of skills, knowledge and attitudes, family structure, etc.) on an ongoing basis;
- work to ensure that children fulfil their potential;
- always remember that nothing is insignificant: children absorb everything;
- bear in mind that child-rearing is based on a symbiotic family relationship.

IMPLEMENTATION

The families of 2,658 boys and girls aged 0-6 are now involved in the program. They are divided into 659 work groups and come from 266 communes (out of Galicia's total of 313 communes), although the program does not cover all parts of Galicia.

Meetings with Parents & Children

Invitations

A general assembly is planned with all families, but given conditions of

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isolation and lack of transportation, the invitation is tailored as much as possible to the specific situation of each village and each family. We distinguish between regions and families who are already familiar with "Preescolar na Casa" and those who know little or nothing about it. In regions where people know about the program, one meeting is held for quite a large area and all the parents in the villages within a reasonable radius are invited, taking into account available means of transportation.

The purpose of this first meeting is to get the parents involved in the organizing process. They themselves will decide who will attend the meetings and where they will meet in the course of the year. In this way, they assume some responsibility from the outset.

In some cases, the counsellor sends out the invitations himself based on information on the families provided by the municipal council or parish priest. In other cases, the invitations are sent out by a resource person, who is not directly involved in the program but serves as a backer and helper. Usually, the resource person is a priest or someone who knows the region and its people well. Today, parents who have taken the "Preescolar na Casa" program in the past often serve in this capacity, taking it upon themselves to motivate other parents and encourage them to attend the meetings.

In the case of regions where people are unfamiliar with the "Preescolar na Casa" program, the counsellor goes to homes in the community and encourages parents to take the program if he observes a need, thus establishing a relationship and opening lines of communication. The visits to people's homes also help us to determine which families are the most underprivileged and which have the fewest options. We therefore try to visit all the parents, if we can, to invite them to a group meeting, which is also important so the parents themselves can decide who will attend the meetings and where they will be held.

The meetings

Once the group has been formed and the site chosen, meetings are held with the parents and the children every two weeks. As a rule, all the parents undertake at the beginning to complete the program. A meeting usually takes at least two hours. It usually includes the following parts:

1) Call to order. Discussion of progress during the previous two weeks. All participants express their points of view. Children present activities done at home; emphasis on the creativity of the parents and children and on everyday activities; comments.

b) One or more activities conducted with the participation of parents. All types of materials are used, but preference is given to materials which are locally available to everyone. Great importance is also attached to play, songs, etc. All these activities are designed to demonstrate what can be done at home and stimulate the creativity of the parents. The purpose of the meeting is to motivate, explain, encourage, guide, prompt reflection, seek the best approach in each case. But the real work starts after the meeting and continues until the following meeting.

3. Presentation of the program for the next two weeks. Brainstorming to come up with activities related to the theme for the next two weeks, and to the activities already planned in the material given to the families.

4. While the children play, the adults discuss a practical question related to child-rearing. The question may be prompted by their experiences or by a magazine, book, etc. (e.g. children's drawings, play and playthings, bed-wetting, bladder control, jealousy, etc.).

Parents show lively interest and attend regularly, even though some have to travel long distances to do so.

Counsellors

The counsellors, chosen for their familiarity with rural Galicia (and their ability to adapt to it), are knowledgeable about education and practice it in keeping with the spirit of the program. They are school teachers on loan, paid employees, or in some cases volunteers.

The training they receive includes: training tailored to help them work with adults; theoretical, but geared to facilitating practice; not only pedagogical, but broad and integrated with respect to rural society; tailored to the specific characteristics of the work in question.

It is designed to turn out counsellors who are:

- sensitive to the situation in rural Galicia;
- able to foster in people an awareness of their own values: language, sense of community, wholesome living, etc.;
- informed or interested in becoming informed about problems in rural Galicia;
- able to establish good relations with the families so they can base their approach on socialand family life, not just scholastics;
- able to use simple language and stay close to the people;
- open, tolerant, understanding, able to understand local realities, always willing to learn;
- willing to take a back seat to the parents;
- enthusiastic and able to infect others with their enthusiasm;
- and, of course, knowledgeable about child-rearing.

Information & Training

The "Preescolar na Casa" program puts out a monthly 12-page publication called The Magazine for the parents of children aged 0-6 (circulation, 3,500). It deals with the program's activities, with issues related to pre-school children, the goals their education ought to pursue, ways to use the natural and social

environment to stimulate children, etc. It also deals with health and nutrition and includes suggestions for activities, games, stories, hobbies, etc.

The program produces two half-hour radio programs each week for parents, children and the general public. These programs are intended to support the work of the counsellors and promote communication between adults and children, educational activities, and play. They also provide information on all questions related to early childhood education as well as songs, stories, riddles, games, comments and interviews related to education.

We also produce in association with Galician Television a weekly half-hour television program for parents including suggestions for activities.

The library was created to meet the training needs of the counsellors. It has a section on child-rearing for parents. The counsellors have found that parents from rural areas, especially the younger ones, want to read and do read the books they can get their hands on.

The program has also published booklets for parents on various subjects: play and playthings, children and drawing, songs, etc. Last but not least, the library has a well-stocked children's section; these books are lent to parents at the meetings so they can read them to their children and show them the illustrations.

The counsellors are convinced of the vital importance of spontaneous play for children, and hence of toys which encourage play. Despite everything, toys are often indispensable. Consequently, the material distributed to the families includes toy-making suggestions. The program also has other types of toys for the children to play with during the meetings. One of the goals is to teach the parents to appreciate the importance of play for children.

EVALUATION

Successes

After years out of school and uninterested in education, the parents in the program start learning again, not only about child-rearing but about all aspects of their lives. The discussions lead the parents to gradual involvement in joint actions. They start to support community efforts which eventually influence the family and the entire neighbourhood: struggles, protests, the fight for a higher standard of living or better quality of life.

The meetings are valuable for promoting participation, dialogue and spontaneous communication, for such opportunities are often lacking in rural regions.

The observed results include:

- enhanced self-esteem and self-acceptance;

- a positive influence on family life with improved participation by all;
- better use of local resources;
- closer observation of their children's progress and more encouragement.

The parents become educators, whose process progresses from schooling in the home to general education, and from part-time education to ongoing education. Demand is growing. Many parents are taking the initiative and approaching the program coordinators. Supply has been supplanted by demand. What was originally conceived of as an extension to school has become a self-sufficient entity. The children's interest and enthusiasm serves to motivate the parents.

The children display improved communication skills, spontaneity, confidence, self-esteem and independence. They are not shy to ask questions. They trade stories and share toys more willingly. The program has also given rise to broader cultural development experiments. Beyond the borders of Galicia, a number of similar programs have been launched, usually bearing the same name.

Problems

Parents underestimate the educational potential of the home and overestimate the role of the school system. They do not realize their own capacities and the value of the local environment. Parents often fail to realize the importance of the first years of life. They connect childhood development with school; education therefore begins too late. Parents participate in the program for only a short time. They start late and drop it as soon as the child enters school.

The educators change frequently, due to the hard and untypical working conditions and transfers, which means that the counsellors often lack experience and specific training for the program. We find we have an inadequate background in adult education; this has proven to be a handicap. Human and financial resources are limited.

REFLECTIONS

Rural areas have enormous needs, but there are also opportunities for development. People want to improve their living conditions, even if they do not always know how to go about it. They are capable of joining forces, working together, creating bonds of solidarity. The results of the project lead us to conclude that the following factors are essential for the success of an adult

education program in a rural environment. The educators must:

- know about existing needs and be able to predict future needs;
- identify the basic factors influencing people's lives;
- organize simple activities whose results can be evaluated in the short-term;
- be able to draw conclusions from the results which can be applied elsewhere;
- define objectives, delve into issues, review and assess the approach;
- foresee potential difficulties caused by the personalities of the participants or by the conditions under which the activities are conducted;
- select activities on the basis of the program's general objectives and spirit.

Illiteracy is not only the inability to read and write; it is a person's inability to understand what is happening all around, and what he or she is doing; to grasp the causes of problems and find appropriate, fundamentally effective, long-term solutions. This type of illiteracy is common in rural areas, where people have a poor understanding of the changes brought on by progress. Rural regions also lack a vision of the future and fail to realize the importance of education in order to adapt to the complexities of modern life.

But these problems are not unique to rural environments. The educators who go to work in the countryside are also beset by them. They are ill-prepared for innovative educational approaches in which citizens are called upon to play an active role, and they reduce education to the schools, dismissing educational efforts conducted outside the walls of the institution.

The experience of "Preescolar na Casa" and other similar programs has demonstrated that with proper guidance, rural populations are perfectly capable of participating in an innovative educational project and achieving good results. There are educators who are aware of their own limitations and are striving to improve their skills to meet the specific needs of citizens in rural areas.

There is also hope for the ability of educational institutions to adapt, insofar as they are putting up no resistance to the innovative experiments springing up in so many places, For the results tend to be positive and the costs are low.

Broadening the Scope of Education

The Ancares region of Lugo province is a mountainous beekeeping area. A teacher in the "Preescolar na Casa" program organized and led a beekeeping training project for youths and adults in the region to help them boost honey production. A training program funded by the Spanish government and the European Social Fund was therefore set up under the supervision of two technicians to promote the transition from cottage industry to modern production. From this project there emerged a honey producers' cooperative whose purpose was to train new beekeepers and market the honey.

This experience demonstrated to local citizens that they could improve their

economic and social lot without leaving home. The project led to the creation of a sheep and goat farm and produced improved crop yields through the use of better methods and the end result was better knowledge of agricultural production and marketing techniques, and at the psychological level a greater inclination to stay in the region and increased awareness of the possibilities of collective action.

This experiment also yielded a new community development project on which three people — a community organizer, a psychologist and an agrologist — worked full time under the supervision of "Preescolar na Casa" counsellors. It was funded by Cáritas Española, the local municipal council and the government of the Autonomous Community.

The project's main results were:

- a study of local inhabitants' most pressing needs and how they could be satisfied in the short term;
- extensive and detailed information on all public and private assistance programs for which local citizens could be eligible (subsidies, bursaries, technical assistance, etc.);
- a home care service for elderly people in need who have no family and do not want to leave their homes and communities.

The Ancares regional development project is now entirely locally managed and staffed; a number of local community organizers are involved. Local development projects have also been launched in other parts of Galicia in cooperation with the "Preescolar na Casa" program, in some cases organized by people who had been involved in "Preescolar na Casa."